



QUALITY MATTERS

Theme: Virtual Learning Environment and its Impact on Higher Education Institutions

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QUOTE OF THIS ISSUE

• Training developers need to integrate technology seamlessly into the curriculum instead of viewing it as an add-on, an after-thought, or an event.”

Heidi Hayes Jacobs

• There can be infinite uses of the computer and of new technology [in training], but if the instructors themselves are not able to bring it to the learners and make it work, then it fails.”

Senator Nancy Kassebaum

If you have comments and suggestions on this issue of the newsletter or want to contribute to the next issue, please contact our office:

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This newsletter is published every three months by the Center for Educational Improvement and Quality Assurance (CEIQA) of St. Mary’s University (SMU). The objective of the newsletter is to inform the SMU community as well as the business and industry, government and non-government stakeholders and others who might be interested to know about the activities and accomplishments of the institution in fostering quality education and research in the Ethiopian Higher Education setting.

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FROM THE EDITORIAL DESK

Dear Readers,
Welcome to Vol 14, No.56.

The theme of this issue is Virtual Learning Environment and its Impacts on Higher Education Institutions.

Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) assist instructors to plan lessons, manage administrative work, track students’ performance, provide learning materials and support students. As a result, a lot of higher education institutions have already implemented VLE. However, the transition from conventional classroom to virtual learning is challenging. Thus, this small paper tries to identify and share some of the major impacts on higher education teaching leaning process to our readers..

In addition to this, readers will also have the opportunity to hear from Dr. Tariku Sime Guta, from Jimma University, about Jimma University’s experience in implementing online education in general and virtual learning environment in particular.

Moreover, the newsletter has news and educational jokes sections. The news section briefly talks about the international online training in which St. Mary’s University was represented by Ato Shegaw G.Medihn, Director of the Center for Educational Development and Quality Assurance (CEIQA).

Check out the full version of this edition of our newsletter!

Good read!

RESEARCH CORNER

Virtual Learning Environment and its Impact on Higher Education Institutions

Tekeste W/Michal (PhD) SMU

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement in ICT has brought a very great improvement in the field of education. For that reason, higher education institutions in several countries, have employed online education which is interchangeably termed as “distance education”, “e-learning”, “online learning”, “blended learning”, “computer-based learning”, “web-based learning”, “virtual learning”, “tele-education”, “cyber learning”, “Internet-based learning”, “distributed learning”. These terms are similar; each refers to the act of using technology in learning, but how students engage in that process is slightly different ("Are Online Learning", 2019).

Virtual learning environment (VLE), which is the focus of this paper, is an online system comprising a range of tools to support and manage learning (JISC J. I., 2010). It is relatively new teaching tool and the exact time of its beginning is not clearly known. However, it is linked to the UK's Open University, which has been utilising computers for learning since the 1970s (Baker & Gossman, 2013). Many times VLE is used interchangeably with learning management system (LMS) (Mosquera, 2017).

Many empirical studies have identified and indicated that pedagogy, communication, technology, time management, and assessment are factors that affect the implementation of quality of education in higher education institutions (Limpers, Buckner, Kaufman, & Frisby, 2015, p. 26). However, it is not possible to discuss all of them in this small paper. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to highlight and inform readers about some of the major issues that impact the quality of teaching online, via VLEs

2. Major Impacts of Virtual Learning Environments on Higher Education

No doubt, online learning and the inclusion of digital

technologies into the education system can enhance learning tremendously, but education is a complex system and trying to incorporate new teaching tools, whatever the level of modernity into the education system without prior assessment of its strengths and drawbacks means ‘repeating the past mistakes’ (Mason, 2002) because all tools have their intrinsic limitations (Dillenbourg, 2000, p. 9).

In the same vein, the application of virtual learning environment, which is one form of online teaching tool, is not without its drawbacks. It has several impacts on higher education teaching. One of the most significant impacts of online education (VLE) is the changing role of instructors and students. For example, as soon as the mode of face-to-face teaching transferred to online teaching (VLE) the instructors’ and the students’ role automatically changes. For instance, the following changes could be observed in instructors’ roles:

- From lecturer to consultant, guide and resource provider;
- Instructors become expert questioners rather than providers of answers;
- Instructors become designers of learning student experiences rather than just providers of content;
- From a solitary instructor to a member of a learning team (reduces isolation sometimes experienced by teachers);
- From total control of the teaching environment to sharing with the student as fellow learner;
- Instructor-learner power structures erode (JISC, 2010).

In addition to this, as a consequence of the transition from a conventional classroom to online education (VLE), instructors may encounter some more problems. For instance, novice or instructors who haven’t taken appropriate pedagogical courses find online courses involve ‘a heavy workload, technology issues, a student-teacher interaction’ (Limpers, Buck-



ner, Kaufman, & Frisby, 2015). Even experienced instructors are trying to maintain their traditional styles of teaching which is inappropriate to an online format (ibid). Besides, in a face-to-face classroom, instructors get information just by watching students' verbal and non-verbal interactions but this is impossible in online teaching because instructors are unable to see their students face (Mosquera, 2017). This is a typical gap between the conventional and online education.

The other problem that hinders instructors from engaging in online teaching wholeheartedly is that VLEs are more of institutional-led rather than teacher-led (Walker & White, 2013). That means the overall preparation of online teaching is mainly done by the institutes and instructors have little participation in the preparation of content for online teaching.

As clearly discussed for instructors above, the students' roles also change:

- From passive receptacles for hand-me-down knowledge to constructors of their own knowledge;
- Students move from memorising facts towards solving problems;
- Students view topics from multiple perspectives;
- Students devise their own questions and search for their own answers;
- Increased emphasis on students as autonomous, independent, self-motivated managers of their own learning;
- There is a change in emphasis from receiving information from the teacher and learning to 'pass the test' towards using knowledge;
- Students have greater access to resources (JISC, 2010).

Students are also affected by several other factors. In one sense, the more students engage in the lesson from where they are and at any time, the more they become 'motivated and invest in the lesson' (Mason, 2002). However, according to a study conducted on this same subject, the flexibility of online learning combined with everyday life commitments causes many students to fall victim to procrastination (JISC, 2010). This seems true in developing countries where many students have to deal with external factors, which include family, work and various other daily responsibilities, in addition to school. This indirectly

or directly 'exposes students for permanent procrastination' (Baker & Gossman, 2013).

Not all students can benefit from online courses. Unless the online courses go in line with their styles and skills it will be difficult for them to participate in the learning and they do not like to take online course wholeheartedly (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiago, 2017).

For example, in a study conducted on the issue, a significant percentage of student respondents favored classroom-based teaching (Ayres, 2002, pp. 246-247). Moreover, some students expressed their choice for pencil and paper exam because 'online exams caused them greater anxiety, were more difficult and did not provide much feedback' (Vilanova & Varas, 2014).

VLEs are mostly a solo learning and mostly students work alone. They don't have instructors or knowledgeable friends by their side to discuss difficult questions or to clarify a topic as they used to do in their conventional classrooms. Even if they sometimes have the opportunity to get feedback via online, it is not immediate. Furthermore, virtual learning focuses more on theory; as a result, thousands of students spend most of their time listening to or watching videos, and looking at slide presentations. They don't have the opportunity to conduct experiments except video/computer/ supported physical exercise (Mason, 2002).

Another impact worth mentioning includes the impossibility for some learners and instructors to access modern technologies due to economic or cultural reasons. In spite of belonging to a high-tech era, some students and teachers do not have equal opportunities to access the different technological devices available; a case in point is the situation created in Ethiopia after the appearance of COVID-19. It is a challenge for the government to compromise the interrupted conventional classrooms due to lack of capacity in the technology, network and skilled manpower.

The other impact of VLE is the gap it creates between the digital natives (those who grew up using technology) and the digital immigrants (those who have come up late to the world of technology (Mosquera, 2017).



For the young growing up with the technology, it is natural and easy for them to make use of (ibid). On the contrary, for some teachers who are relatively less educated in the technology, it may be frustrating experience to use the new technology in front of their 'students who might be more digitally savvy' (Mosquera, 2017, p. 481).

Conclusion

There is no doubt VLE (online education) has a range of positive impacts. It can promote reflection; accommodate the needs of students, increase enthusiasm and confidence, improved readiness to learn, and many more (Baker & Gossman, 2013). It has also several drawbacks. In this small paper, attempts have been made to highlight some of the most significant impacts of online technology (VLE).

However, the aforementioned points have been drawn from the findings and literatures obtained from the studies conducted worldwide particularly in developed countries.

Therefore, conducting further rigorous research on the issue based on our context is necessary to get the most out of virtual learning environment (VLE).

Furthermore, to address any of the possible negative challenges in the implementation of VLE, higher education institutions need to provide professional development for instructors, training for learners, and technical support for the concerned bodies.

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INTERVIEW

An interview with Dr. Tariku Sime Gutu (PhD)

Dr. Tariku Sime Gutu is an academic staff and assistant professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Jimma University. He has been engaged in teaching, research and community services since he joined JU. Currently, he is serving as E-Learning Director of the University. His areas of interest are sociology of education, and diversity management in education, educational technology and contemporary issues in education. We are so thankful to Dr. Tariku for his precious time in sharing his academic experience and expertise. Here is the interview:-



QM: Thank you Dr. Tariku for your time and willingness to give us this opportunity of having this interview with you. To begin with, would you please tell us something about what virtual learning environment (VLE) is?

Tariku: You're welcome, dear. Instead of dwelling on the meaning of Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), I think it would be good to see from the functionality point of view. I see two primary terms in the question. 'Virtual' and 'learning.' Indeed, the central issue here is learning, but the means is virtual. A virtual learning

environment might be conceptualized taking into account various features and perspectives.

In my view, it is a platform where the students and instructors interact through online to develop competencies via a myriad of learning activities. It is an



environment with in-built pedagogies that systematically entertains planning, executing, and evaluating processes. It combines various components, including curriculum mapping in modules, learner tracking, support for the users, electronic communication through forums, threaded discussions, chat, journals, etc. Learning and learners, however, are the principal domains in VLE. In my view, a virtual learning environment by itself is not a silver bullet but a tool that creates an opportunity for learning through various engagement mechanisms. Virtual learning environment neither replaces the face to face interaction nor the existing educational practices. It fosters and stretches interaction possibilities for deep, meaningful and heuristic learning.

QM: What is Jimma's University experience like in relation to VLE?

Tariku: It is more than a decade since virtual learning was introduced to Jimma University. The initiation was uncommon for Ethiopian higher education institutions, including first-generation public universities. Nonetheless, the experiences could not bear the aspired fruition fundamentally because of intermittent practices. Seemingly, the intentions and practices were not strategic to institutionalize virtual learning Environments on campus. Encouraging results have been gained year after year, particularly in the last five years, to assume the current status of running a program exclusively via a virtual learning environment. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic rocked the status quo and created a better opportunity to engage in online teaching and learning during the lockdown though some of the users took it as the lesser of two evils; resuming academic activities via online learning or abandoning class at all. Albeit its terrible effects, COVID-19 is an opportunity to change the accustomed traditional practices. It reminds me of the proverbial saying, "Every cloud has a silver lining." It is a clarion call for all academic institutions across the country to mainstream virtual learning. Currently, the eLearning bandwagon is gathering momentum in many learning institutions. Jimma University runs mostly postgraduate programs comfortably using the customized Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle). However, a significant number of staff members have a predilection for face-to-face learning. In conclusion, the signs of

progress are encouraging, and there are tremendous opportunities to realize the institutional aspiration through the resolute determination of all stakeholders despite the challenges.

QM: What problems have you encountered when you transformed from conventional classroom to online mode of teaching?

Tariku: I believe no educational institution in the country is holistically transformed in this regard. However, at Jimma University, there have been promising efforts at the institution level and propensities from individuals (instructors and students) towards technology-oriented teaching and learning. The challenges, therefore, can be seen from an institutional and individual point of view. When online learning was introduced, there was no strong structure and infrastructure to run the program. Much later on, e-learning is organized as a directorate office with better human and material resources to function at the grass-root level. However, the big problem has been anchored in maintaining conventional leadership, teaching and learning. Lack of will and determination to leave the comfort zone is still a severe challenge. There has been a lack of strong and consistent commitment from the executive, medium and lower levels to plan and implement online learning, which has significant implications for human and material resource utilization. Instructors, including seasoned staff members, have not engaged wholeheartedly in online learning and tend towards live classroom performance. In addition to attitudinal inertia, technical skills are also problems challenging the execution of online learning programs. The digital divide also has its share of the current status of the eLearning program. All, attitude related issues seem to have a pernicious effect on planning, implementing and evaluating eLearning at Jimma University, for it cannot function in separate silos.

QM: What are the key factors for making an online course effective?

Tariku: I strongly believe that ensuring effective implementation of online learning is highly determined by the context. However, some fundamentals make online learning successful in higher education institutions. These are associated with, among other things,



the university as an institution, the instructors and the learners as significant stakeholders.

Primarily, the existence of developed institutional learning policy frameworks, strategies and guidelines on one hand and commitment at different leadership levels as enablers, on the other hand, are significant factors that hugely contribute to the effectiveness of online learning. The state of infrastructure and dedication for collaborative work with internal and external stakeholders is another determinant factor related to the institution.

Secondly, instructors' attitude and propensity towards virtual learning and their technical skills to transfer pedagogical skills to online facilitation play an immense role in succeeding in online teaching and learning. If they trivialize the importance of online learning, no matter how the institutions are committed; the traditional practice may not change. A positive attitude and commitment would assist instructors in tailoring their academic endeavors to the institutional purpose.

Finally, students' related factors such as their attitude towards online learning and their technical competence can hinder or enhance learning. The institutional and instructor related factors play an indispensable role in online learning. Nonetheless, students' engagement matters more than anything else, for it determines the ultimate purpose of learning.

QM: Some instructors and students say that virtual learning is not as effective as in face-to-face learning. What is your view?

Tariku: In my view, the argument on virtual learning and face to face learning emanates from two perspectives. First, it is from the perspective of doing business as usual. I think people with this perspective may not have compelling evidence for their face-to-face over virtual learning. However, they are accustomed to always practicing within their comfort zone. The second and probably the pedagogical reason is associated with the quality of online instruction in managing learning. There are claims related to the nature of disciplines that require physical presence and human flavor. Indeed, that is understandable. However, there is much about eLearning that remains misun-

derstood. The quality of online learning improves as students and instructors familiarize themselves with the platform and increase their engagement. The synchronous and asynchronous nature of online learning opens unlimited possibilities of unpacking students' and instructors' potential for interaction and learning. Online learning can be more engaging than face to face. Primarily, it supports multimedia formats that address the learning styles of different students that grab their attention. Secondly, there is a considerable possibility of accessing privileged institutions and celebrated professionals without geographic boundaries. Above all, it creates an opportunity to learn at one's own pace. The bottom line is although every perspective and practice has its limitation, the contemporary dynamic education enterprise demands an environment that promotes virtual learning

QM: What are the advantages and disadvantages of Virtual Learning, compared to in-person classroom learning?

Tariku: Learning by itself is a complex system and active process that requires the involvement of different stakeholders. Therefore, pros and cons are always there but what matters is how to figure out the strengths and limitations to maximize the benefits. Though they are not exhaustive, the following are some of the advantages and disadvantages of online learning with their implications for the institutions, instructors and students.

Advantages

Online learning is one of the greatest revolutions in most educational institutions, including higher learning institutions. It can extend outreach, teaching and learning without time and place limit. It is an important instrument to improve access, success, equity and relevance using any learning management system, which eventually helps realize an institutional vision.

In this digital era, it is unarguable for instructors to be in step with the educational technologies. They may have different teaching styles, but adjusting themselves to students' learning styles is quite essential. Virtual learning helps instructors understand themselves in terms of subject area competence, teaching methods, assessment mechanisms, the learners' and



learning environment. They can enrich the teaching experience by diversifying the delivery methods and activities in a flexible format to accommodate differences. There is also a possibility of realizing how theories can come to life in the classroom through multimedia; it paves the way for better connectivity, flexibility, innovation, accessibility and efficiency in instructors' academic endeavors.

Students as the center of education enterprise, through online learning they can get a more flexible schedule that conveniently fits their available time and location, accessibility to different multimedia sources to quench their interest of learning style. Moreover, it encourages them to take responsibility for their learning. In a nutshell, students can bridge all gaps between themselves and instructors resulted because of antiquated practices.

Disadvantages

It is common to use the "new normal" to refer to the increased use of online learning. However, online learning limitations and understanding them will help frame the strategies to ensure an uninterrupted academic journey. To mention some:

E-learning requires at least a computer/laptop and internet connection. Because of the digital divide, the intended instructional advantage may not be achieved. Due to the traditional experience, the students and instructors may be prone to procrastination for online learning since it requires strong self-motivation and time management skills. Moreover, lack of physical contact can cause social isolation, which cannot be easily solved through online learning. Above all, relying on internet connection and electricity for learning may hurt the users working repertoire. And may

end up developing a negative attitude towards online learning

QM: What do you think is important to overcome any of the possible problems? What do you think (suggest) about the future of VLE in Ethiopian Higher Education Institutions?

Tariku: The challenges institutions and individuals encounter for effective use of online learning might be different based on the context. However, the following points are my priority areas to realize online learning in any academic institution.

- i. **Institutionalizing online learning:** support with policy frameworks, strategies and guidelines
- ii. **Building an eLearning culture:** Promoting eLearning using all possible means
- iii. **Contextualizing the approaches and models of implementation:** Instead of implementing online programs across all colleges/ institutes and programs at once, the step-by-step approach of diffusing to the programs would be more effective and promising. Besides, instead of going for the pure online, the blended model would maximize virtual learning benefits.
- iv. **Creating Community of enquiry:** students' self-directed/motivated learning, instructors' effort of creating an opportunity for learning through facilitating online using diversified strategies, leaders' commitment to realize an environment that supports online learning would contribute to active and meaningful virtual learning.

QM: Thank you very much for granting us this interview.

SMU NEWS

International Online Training Held

A five-day online training was held at continental level on harmonizing quality assurance and accreditation systems, from December 30, 2020 to January 04, 2021. The course targeted current Quality Assurance managers and leaders in private and public higher education institutions, who have been active in national and regional quality assurance networks. The training

was sponsored by German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and African Higher Education Quality Assurance and Accreditation (HAQAA2). The "Harmonization of African Higher Education, Quality Assurance and Development Accreditation (HAQAA)" is an initiative that has been established to support the development of a harmonized quality assurance



(QA) and accreditation system at institutional, national, regional, and Pan-African continental level.

25 Participants, from 14 African countries, including Ethiopia, were selected to attend the online seminar. From Ethiopia, Ato Shegaw G/Medihm from St. Mary's University and Dr. Dessalegn Ejigu from Bahir Dar University participated in the online-seminar. The course was intended to be delivered in a blended learning format; however, due to the spreading of COVID-19, it was delivered only online. The training approach included presentations by experts, interactive discussions among the participants (peer learning), case studies and individual feedback and coaching. The aim was to offer a platform for sharing both

African and European experiences. Through the online platform, selected participants had an opportunity to work on questions and self-assessment tasks and to network with other participants and trainers during the course activities. To consolidate the seminar learning materials such as videos, screen casts, handbooks, other tools such as templates and checklists were also provided.

EDUCATION JOKES

An uneducated father with his educated son

1. An uneducated father with his educated son went on a camping trip. They set-up their tent and fell asleep.

Some hours later, the father woke up his son.

Father- Look up to the sky and tell me what you see.

Son- I see millions of stars.

Father- And what does that tell you?

Son- Astronomically, it tells that there are millions of galaxies and planets.

Father slaps the son hard and says- "Idiot, someone has stolen our tent"

MORAL: Too much education can spoil our common sense

2. A family of mice was surprised by a big cat. Father Mouse jumped and said, "Bow-wow!" The cat ran away. "What was that, Father?" asked Baby Mouse. "Well, son, that's why it's important to learn a second language."

MORAL: Being a multilingual is a blessing not a curse

An Invitation to Submit Letters to the Editor

QM is pleased to announce the introduction of a section that will feature letters to the editor. Those who wish to comment on an article published or anything in the newsletter will now have an opportunity to do so. We would welcome your input! Please send your news, and comments even an article related to quality education to share in upcoming newsletters:

To submit a letter to the editor, please email ceiga@smuc.edu.et

Virtual Links on Quality Assurance

Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) www.anqahe.org

Asian Pacific Quality Network (<http://www.apqn.org>)

ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) www.mqa.gov.my/oqan/

Association of African University (www.aau.org)

Association of Quality Assurance Agencies of the Islamic World (AQAAIW)

www.mqa.gov.my/aqaalw/index01.cfm

Caribbean Area Network for Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education (CANQATE) www.canqate.org Central and Eastern Europe Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CEENQA)

www.ceenetwork.hu

Central Asian Network for Quality Assurance and Accreditation (CANQA) www.canqa.net

Center for International Research on Higher Education (<http://bc.org/avp/soe/cihe>)

Ethiopian Ministry of Education (<http://www.moe.gov.et>)

Eurasian Quality Assurance Network (EAQAN) www.eaqan.org

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (<http://www.enqa.eu>)

European Quality Assurance Network for Informatics Education (EQANIE) www.eqanie.eu

Higher Education Relevance and Quality Agency (www.higher.edu.et)

Institute of International Education (www.iie.org)

International center of Excellence in Tourism and Hospitality Education (THE-ICE) www.the-ice.org International Council for Open and Distance Learning (www.icde.org)

International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa (<http://www.eric.ed.gov>)

International Network for Higher Education in Africa (NHEA) (<http://www.be.edu>)

International Network for Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (INQAAHE)

<http://www.inqaahe.org>

Program for Research on Private Higher Education (PROPHE)(www.allbany.edu/eaps/prophe)

Quality and Standards Authority of Ethiopia (<http://www.qsae.org>)

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK) (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk>)Talloires network (www.talloires-network.tufts.edu)



St. Mary's University

Programs Offered



Undergraduate Degree Programs (Regular/Extension)

- ◆ Accounting & Finance
- ◆ Management
- ◆ Marketing Management
- ◆ Tourism & Hospitality Management
- ◆ Computing Science

Undergraduate Degree Programs (College of Open and Distance Learning)

- ◆ Accounting
- ◆ Management
- ◆ Marketing Management
- ◆ Financial Economics
- ◆ Rural Development
- ◆ Agricultural Extension
- ◆ Agri-Business Management
- ◆ Cooperative (Accounting & Auditing)
- ◆ Cooperative (Business Management)
- ◆ Educational Planning & Management
- ◆ Economics
- ◆ Sociology
- ◆ Public Administration and Development Management
- ◆ Agricultural Economics
- ◆ Banking and Finance
- ◆ Logistics and Supply Chain Management

Graduate Programs Offered in Partnership with Open University of Tanzania (OUT)

- ◆ Master of Project Management
- ◆ Master of Arts in International Cooperation & Development
- ◆ Master of Science in Economics
- ◆ Master of Human Resource Management

Postgraduate Programs (Regular)

- ◆ MSc in Quality and Productivity Management
- ◆ MA in Social Work
- ◆ MA in Development Management
- ◆ Master of Business Administration (MBA)
- ◆ MBA with HRM Concentration
- ◆ MSc. in Agricultural Economics
- ◆ MA in Project Management
- ◆ MBA in Accounting and Finance
- ◆ MA in Marketing Management
- ◆ MA in Development Economics
- ◆ MSc. in Computer Science
- ◆ MA in Higher Education
- ◆ MA in Sociology

Graduate Programs Offered in Partnership with Universita Cattolica del Sacro Coure, Italy

- ◆ MBA in Impact Entrepreneurship

Graduate Programs Offered in Partnership with IGNOU (Distance)

- ◆ MBA (Master of Business Administration)
- ◆ MSW (Master of Arts in Social Work)
- ◆ MEC (Master of Arts in Economics)
- ◆ MPA (Master of Arts in Public Administration)
- ◆ MARD (Master of Arts in Rural Development)
- ◆ MSO (Master of Arts in Sociology)
- ◆ MPS (Master of Arts in Political Science)
- ◆ MCOM (Master of Commerce)

Short Term Training

- ◆ Business & Computer Science areas
- ◆ Higher Education areas

Services through SMU's Testing Center

- ◆ TOEFL (Internet-based test)
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